

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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## Gender Discrimination and Sexual Scandal Outrageous to Afghan Nation

Sexual discrimination and violence against women are widespread in Afghanistan and make the headlines in national and international media every so often. Although the rights and freedoms of men and women are constitutionally equal, women fall victim to gender discrimination in domestic and collective life, mainly as a result of deep-seated parochial mindset and tribal tradition as well as presence of the militant fighters, who exercise misogynistic view.

Afghan women are likely to suffer in social and political arenas on the basis of their gender. Their rights, liberty, and dignity are violated in one way or another. For instance, they are treated as pariahs not only by radical individuals and militant fighters, but also discriminated in the government's machinery. Recently, Habibullah Ahmadzai, a former senior advisor to President Ghani, has claimed that some Afghan officials were involved in sexual scandal, exchanging sexual favors for government posts. Later, Mariam Wardak, a former consultant to Ghani's former national security adviser, confirmed Ahmadzai's allegation during an interview with an Indian news channel saying that "the issues he [Ahmadzai] brought up and highlighted reflect reality".

However, Haroon Chakhansuri, a spokesman to Ghani, called Ahmadzai's allegations "false and baseless" adding that the issue would be investigated and the result would be shared with the public. Chakhansuri stated, "Ahmadzai's allegations are insult to the women who have sacrificed for so long to reach decision-making levels. No one will be allowed to harm the honor of Afghan women".

Afghan officials, including CEO Abdullah Abdullah, have called for an investigation into the allegations.

The recent alleged sexual abuse is not the first high-profile case in Afghanistan, which ranked 168th out of 189 countries in the United Nation's Gender Inequality Index. Last year, five officials with Afghanistan's soccer federation, including its president Keramuddin Keram, were suspended after female soccer players claimed they were sexually assaulted. Many of the allegations regarding the sexual abuse of female soccer players came from Khalida Popal, a former captain of the Afghan women's national football team who also served as its program director. During an interview with BBC, Khalida said she had witnessed widespread physical and sexual abuse of girls and young women by coaches and federation officials. She had heard girls' complaint about a range of abuse, from rape to sexual touching and harassment.

In 2017, a graphic video of an Afghan air force colonel sexually exploiting a young woman went viral. In the same year, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction said that some widows of Afghan National Security Force members killed in action were forced to perform sexual favors for officials before they could obtain pension benefits.

Meanwhile, the radical groups, mainly the Taliban militants, add to the violence against women and their suffering. Few days back, the Taliban militants had reportedly killed a man and woman in public in Ghor province for love affairs. Meanwhile, a video footage released on social media about a month ago showed the black-robed Taliban lashing two women in desert courts. The Taliban conduct desert courts - where women are being lashed or shot - in their dominated areas repeatedly, which is against Afghan Constitution.

In spite of all the aforementioned facts, one cannot deny the great strides made by Afghan women in the post-Taliban Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the challenges Afghan women encounter on daily basis, women also hold high political positions. That is, Afghan women are widely engaged in social, political, and economic activities without any serious challenge. They serve as MP, judge, minister, adviser, ambassador, etc.

To view Afghan Constitution, both men and women have equal rights and freedoms. Women are supported legally to participate in all social, political, and economic activities and could run for presidential election regardless of their gender. In short, there is no legal barrier before Afghan women to take part in social activities similar to their male counterparts.

Overall, violence against women in general and the recent allegations of sexual scandal in particular are highly outrageous. Afghan government has to investigate the issue thoroughly and fairly and bring the perpetrators to justice. Moreover, the government must enforce the law to protect the rights, freedoms, and dignity of all citizens regardless of their gender. Reports about violence against women and sexual discrimination have to be taken serious so that Afghan women could be able to exercise their rights and freedoms freely, as it is stated in the constitution.

## Kim Jong-un's Moneyball Strategy

By: Kent Harrington

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe prioritized pomp over policy while hosting US President Donald Trump this week. The one exception was the issue of North Korea, which recently conducted more short-range missile tests off its east coast. Abe is clearly anxious about keeping Japan and the United States on the same page now that Trump's denuclearization talks with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un have faltered. But at a joint press conference on Monday, Trump dismissed concerns about the latest tests - breaking not just with Abe, but also with his own advisers.

Abe has every reason to worry that Kim is gaining an important diplomatic edge. To be sure, as the North Korean economy struggles and food shortages loom, Kim's bromance with Trump has failed to secure an easing of economic sanctions. But he has now reshuffled his negotiating team and tried to strike a statesmanlike pose, offering to hold yet another summit with Trump if the terms are right.

At the same time, Kim has been shoring up his position for further negotiations, not least by reaching out to China and Russia. Such overtures by the North Korean regime certainly are not unprecedented, but they are unusual. As the scion of a dynasty that has jealously guarded the North's independence for 70 years, Kim, like his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, the state's founder, regards national self-reliance as sacrosanct. Though China and Russia are the Kim regime's traditional allies, Kim's grandfather and father, Kim Jong-il, always kept their distance from the two powers, often playing one off against the other. By contrast, Kim is teaming up with both to tilt the geostrategic field in his favor.

China, Russia, and North Korea most likely are not sharing a script, but they do appear to have settled on a division of labor, and are operating accordingly. Kim is doing his job on the Korean Peninsula, exploiting South Korean President Moon Jae-in's eagerness for rapprochement in order to drive a wedge between South Korea and the US. He is even entertaining the possibility of talks with Abe, who is desperate not to be excluded from the high-level exchanges. China, meanwhile, is playing its traditional role as the North's most influential partner. Ignoring US demands that Kim must abandon his nuclear program before sanctions can be eased, China has suggested that sanctions relief could be used as a confidence-building measure on the way to a political resolution.

For its part, Russia, which participated in failed negotiations to end North Korea's nuclear program more than a decade ago, has now taken the field on Kim's behalf. Last month, Kim and Russian President Vladimir Putin met for the first time. Rejecting the idea that US and South Korean security guarantees could ever suffice to persuade Kim to follow through with denuclearization, Putin called for renewed talks with Russia and China at the table.

This Sino-Russian-North Korean collaboration will most likely continue. Kim has already made a habit of calling Chinese President Xi Jinping before and after his summits with Trump, and his regime will probably be in more frequent contact with the Kremlin, too. This does

not bode well for US objectives on the Korean Peninsula. Though Russia and China will pay lip service to the need for denuclearization, neither country has ever seriously tried to impede the Kim regime's weapons program.

The willingness of China and Russia to tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea reflects a strategic calculation. Even if they are often unhappy with Kim's behavior, their top priority is to shore up his regime. Were it to collapse, the likely outcome would be a reunited Korea under the government in Seoul; China and Russia would suddenly have a US ally - and potentially even US forces - on their borders. Given the stakes, neither country is likely to curb its sanctions-busting oil shipments or, in China's case, rising cross-border trade.

Moreover, China and Russia have plenty to gain from playing a more active role in the Korean nuclear issue. The Kim regime wants US military forces removed not just from the Korean Peninsula, but from the entire Western Pacific theater. That would suit China and Russia just fine. In the meantime, the added attention on US forces in Asia provides useful political fodder at home, especially now that Trump has withdrawn the US from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia. Both Russia and China are concerned about the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system that is now operational in South Korea.

But Sino-Russian cooperation isn't just about the Korean Peninsula. As Western sanctions in response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea have begun to bite, China has become an increasingly important market and source of investment for Russia. And now that China is supplanting America's role in Asia, Russia has all the more reason to improve its relations with the new power. At the same time, it is deepening its economic ties across the region, with plans to triple bilateral trade with Vietnam by 2020.

For China, Russia offers not just energy and raw materials, but, more important, a potential military partnership. Russia can provide defense technologies and the benefits of joint training; and if a conflict arises, it could be China's main ally in Asia. Given Trump's history of threatening, on Twitter, to launch a nuclear war against North Korea, it would be surprising if Russian and Chinese military strategies did not already feature contingency plans for the Korean Peninsula.

Whether Kim's approach will pay off at the negotiating table remains to be seen. But any sports fan should recognize his game plan and the debt he owes to Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland Athletics. In 2002, Beane led the A's to the longest winning streak in Major League Baseball history, not by using sluggers who occasionally blasted homeruns, but by hiring consistent base-hitters.

Despite striking out at the nuclear summits in Singapore and Hanoi, Trump continues to boast that has already knocked the ball over the fence. Meanwhile, Kim is fielding a team that can chalk up consistent points for him over the long term.

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## Taliban and Russia: Foreign Forces Must leave Afghanistan

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

A group of Afghan politicians informally led by former President Hamid Karzai, members of the Taliban led by the deputy leader of the group Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and also some Russian officials attended a ceremony in Moscow to mark the 100th years of Afghanistan-Russia diplomatic relations. The Meetings between the Taliban delegation and political figures were not formally associated with the government and have been seen as a way of preparing the way for full negotiations later. Meanwhile, the contacts are regarded with deep suspicion by many Afghan officials who see them as undermining the legitimacy of the government while reinforcing the position of the Taliban. Mullah Baradar, who was heading a 14-member Taliban delegation, was the center of attention during Tuesday's meeting in Moscow. He is known as a co-founder of the Islamist Taliban and is believed to have played a central role in organizing insurgent activities after the U.S.-led military invasion of Afghanistan 17 years ago. Baradar was traveling through Pakistan in 2010 when American security operatives, together with local counterparts, arrested him in Karachi. The insurgent commander was then placed in Pakistani custody until late last year Washington requested from Islamabad to free Baradar hoping to play role in the peace process that U.S. diplomats initiated with the Taliban late last fall to seek an end to the Afghan war.

The Taliban had already clarified in a statement issued late Tuesday that no Kabul government representatives would participate in the intra-Afghan conference, and insurgent delegates will interact only with Afghan politicians as well as civil society representatives. The Taliban refuse to engage in any peace talks with anyone associated with the U.S.-backed Kabul government, dismissing them as "stooges" installed by foreign "occupation" forces.

However, some of the top leaders including the Former President Hamid Karzai, Chairman of HPC Karim Khalili, CE of Jamiat-e-Islami party Atta Mohammad Noor, Deputy CEO Mohammad Mohaqiq, former National Security Advisor to President Ashraf Ghani Mohammad Hanif Atmar, Ambassador Latif Bahand, former Foreign Minister Rangin Daffar Spanta, former Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Deputy of Hezb-e-Jumbesh Abdullah Qarluq, Hamid Gailani, ex-lawmaker Fawzia Kofi, and some other politicians participated in the meeting.

Hamid Karzai called for Russia to play a greater role in the Afghan peace process. "Afghanistan expects that the Russian Federation act independently and help Afghanistan towards peace alongside support from the United States, China and other countries involved in the issue such as Germany to play an effective role in this sphere," said Karzai. "Afghanistan has good relations with Russia. From the Afghan people's point of view, having an inclusive relation has many advantages and we want a friendly relationship with all countries, especially the countries of the region and the neighboring countries," he said at the meeting. Karzai also called on the US and Russia to help Afghanistan to reach peace and stabil-

ity. The Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) Karim Khalili, emphasized the need for agreeing to "a dignified and just mechanism" for ending years of bloodshed in Afghanistan. Atta Mohammad Noor, the former governor of the northern province of Balkh and a leader of the Jamiat-e-Islami party, said it was in the interests of all sides to establish a good understanding. "We want to have good relations with the Taliban and we expect peace from them," he said. Muhammad Noor said the previous Moscow meeting had yielded "quite positive results." "We are for having good relations with our brothers, with the Taliban," Noor said. "Let's step back a little, embrace each other and create conditions for the start of peace."

The meetings in Moscow come as months of direct peace negotiations between the United States and Taliban appear to have slowed down over the insurgent's refusal to cease hostilities until all U.S.-led international forces withdraw from Afghanistan. While during this meeting once again Taliban and also Russia have jointly called for the withdrawal of U.S.-led coalition troops from Afghanistan, denouncing the foreign presence in the country as a major obstacle to Afghan peace. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, made the his first public remarks in Moscow saying "The Islamic Emirate wants peace but the first step is to remove obstacles to peace and end the occupation of Afghanistan." Baradar said, appearing openly on television in what appeared to be a calculated move to establish his legitimacy as one of the main public faces of the Taliban.

The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also urged foreign forces to leave Afghanistan. He underscored the importance of bilateral relations, saying Russia is ready to offer more help to Afghanistan to fight terrorist groups led by Islamic State and drug-trafficking networks. "This conflict in Afghanistan has no military solution and the only way to settle this issue is to rely on diplomacy and politics. We believe all foreign military [forces] should be withdrawn from the country and the society of Afghanistan should unite in finding a solution," the Russian foreign minister stressed. "We believe that Afghanistan should stay united where all the ethnic groups can live peacefully. We hope that peace will settle in Afghanistan as soon as possible," Lavrov added, saying that accelerated Afghan peace-building efforts recently initiated by Moscow are furthering the peace process.

Overall, this shows that Moscow is gaining more influence in the ongoing process while the recent sixth round of talks between US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban ended in Doha this month with no tangible progress cited by the negotiating teams. As aforementioned, the Taliban still insist that foreign forces must leave Afghanistan before it can agree to peace, but the US refuses to agree to withdrawal until the Taliban put in place security guarantees, a ceasefire, and other commitments including an "intra-Afghan" dialogue with the Kabul government and other Afghan representatives.

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